"Realistic Villains": Examining Social Commentary in Crime Films through *Knives Out* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*

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Regardless of their subgenre, crime films share the fundamental element of presenting audiences with society's intricate executions of law and punishment. Because of this relationship, crime films are able to use their genre-specific elements to include social commentary within their storylines. Using their victims, suspects, and crime resolutions, modern crime fiction pieces such as Rian Johnson's 2019 film *Knives Out* and Halina Reijn's 2022 film *Bodies Bodies Bodies* both implement the larger conversations of class division within their stories. In *Knives Out*, the audience follows the mystery behind the sudden death of the renowned author, Harlan Thrombey—the suspects being his family and staff. Within the film's mystery, Johnson uses elements of the story to recognize and critique those in power who benefit from privilege, suggesting America should change the bias system it currently upholds. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* focuses on couple Bee and Sophie as they join Sophie's upper-class influencer friends for a weekend of partying, but mystery ensues when one of the friends is found dead, leaving only those within the house as suspects. Throughout the film, Reijn critiques the privileges of modern influencers and their often problematic culture, using the critique to warn younger generations about utilizing technology harmfully. This essay will use these pieces of modern crime fiction to explore how fictional crime narratives can use their stories to include social commentary.

Regardless of their subgenre, crime films share the fundamental element of presenting audiences with society's intricate executions of law and punishment within their elaborate storylines. This is the subject that Sociology and Law professor Ferdinando Spina introduces in the article "Crime Films'" by recognizing that crime films "dramatize the uncertainty of moral categories and the ever-present tension between the social order and its violation" (2-3). Crime films explore society's "social order and its violation," and by doing so, they become representational of society—their elements and themes becoming reflective of relevant societal topics. Spina concurs, analyzing the relationship between crime films and society:

> On one hand, crime films reveal something important about the social context that they represent and from which they have been fashioned. On the other, they themselves have an effect on the social context, since their representation of crime, law, justice, and punishment itself becomes culture, acquires meaning, and provides an interpretation of reality. (3)

Within the reflective relationship between crime films and society, these films are able to use their genre elements to include various types of social commentary, creating larger conversations and developing new "interpretations" of pertinent topics within society. In her novel Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society, criminologist Nicole Rafter expands on the specific effects of these "interpretations," explaining that they "sculpt our assumptions about the nature of reality and fill our mental reservoirs with a vast supply of imagery for thinking about crime, criminals, and the role of criminal justice institutions in society" and "guide us in defining justice, heroism, and the illicit" (179). Because of the meaningful societal representations crime films create, they can inform and educate audiences, producing and reshaping how they interpret significant topics that play roles in how they define elements such as "crime" and "justice"—vital elements that likely will determine future perceptions of the justice system itself.

After establishing the relationship between crime films and society, recognizing social commentary within crime films, and acknowledging its importance, it is vital to exemplify these points with recent crime films that epitomize certain types of social commentary using their story elements. Both Rian Johnson's 2019 mystery *Knives Out* and Halina Reijn's 2022 thriller *Bodies Bodies Bodies* are exemplary models of the subject as they comment on a perpetual and relevant topic within modern society—class division. As films structured as whodunit stories, both pieces use their specific genre and story elements—victims, suspects, and crime resolutions—

to examine the different positions members of society are placed in based on their socioeconomic status. *Knives Out* depicts and critiques America's prejudice system that seems grounded in benefitting the privileged upper class by focusing on the class differences between a wealthy family and their staff, hoping to exhibit and propose a new society that America should stray toward. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* similarly criticizes this same system, using the privileged positions of modern influencer characters to exhibit class divisions, working to ultimately caution younger generations about the harmful use of technology and influencer culture they see online. This essay will analyze how these pieces of crime fiction use their story elements to include social commentary regarding class divisions within their storylines, expanding on their crime narratives to not only depict socio-economic issues within modern society but also to help audiences recognize and form newfound perceptions regarding this particular societal issue.

> The victim in a fictional crime story is a vital element as they are what ignites the mystery—the circumstances of their death often being used to symbolize deeper meanings. In *Knives Out*, the film's central victim is the renowned and wealthy author Harlan Thrombey; however, because of the particular decisions Johnson makes revolving around Harlan's death, it is plausible to interpret Harlan as both the victim and the killer within the film's story. Specifically, under the belief that his nurse, Marta, has made a fatal mistake with his medications, Harlan refuses to seek medical attention and instead insists that they hatch a plan to cover up the incident—one of which involves him killing himself (Johnson 00:40:25).

Establishing Harlan as both the victim and instigator, Johnson seemingly uses his passing to depict the figurative death of the long-established systems that have bred the current prejudiced class system society continues to implement today. In the moments the audience sees Harlan, it is obvious that he detests his family's greedy and egotistical behavior, desperately wanting them to change their ways. In an attempt to do so, he confronts the family about their behaviors by threatening his unfaithful son-in-law, cutting off funds to his daughter-in-law, and firing his son. Harlan explains his sudden choices in a flashback scene by saying, "It's unfair of me to keep you tethered to something that isn't yours to control. I've done you a great disservice. All these years, I've kept you from building something of your own, that was yours" (Johnson 00:16:00). Harlan regretfully recognizes that he has raised his family within society's classist system from which they benefit—a decision Harlan comes to regret as it has turned his family into money-driven, egotistical perpetrators of this privilege. Although Harlan's efforts leave a fearful impression on the family, it is clear that the Thrombeys still feel secure in their positions. This leads to Harlan's

final move—his will reading. It is not until the Thrombeys learn that everything is left to Marta that their perceptions change, and they begin to grow fearful (Johnson 1:07:18). In the article "*Knives Out* Is a Surprisingly Subversive Mystery," editor and writer Olivia Rutigliano elaborates on the significant meaning of Harlan's death in terms of the Thrombeys:

> Harlan Thrombey...comes to represent a longstanding system of influence and control that rejects the privileged descendants it has begotten, needing to die for this rejection to be fully meaningful and for a new, more productive world order to be born. His death is a sacrifice, it can prevent the ascension of his terrible family—from a 'body-politic' angle, it might help save America. (Rutigliano)

Using Harlan's death, Johnson implies that to prevent the perpetuation of unfair systems that reward those who are privileged, those who benefit from America's classist system society must recognize the unjustness in society's current ways and be willing to make changes or sacrifices for the sake of a more equal system. This is seemingly the interpretation Johnson wants the audience to take away from the commentary within the film—an interpretation that, if taken into serious consideration, could "save America" from continuing to perpetuate the biased system that Harlan strives to and eventually does end.

When continuing to analyze the deeper meaning of victims within crime fiction stories, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* follows the death of a social media influencer to serve as a warning to younger generations about enabling the harmful behaviors they see these influencers exhibiting online. Similar to *Knives Out*, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* focuses on a group of upper-class individuals; however, in this case, it is a group of young-adult influencers who, during the night of a party, begin to suspect each other of murder after their friend—central victim David—is found dead. The mystery that plagues the majority of the film is solved when it is discovered that there was no murder at all. The cause of David's death is that he accidentally slits his throat when attempting to post a TikTok (Reijn 1:26:53). In the "Digital Technology" chapter of the novel The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction, Nicole Kenley, twenty-first-century detective fiction and global crime researcher, elaborates on the critical role that technology plays within fictional crime pieces: "The formulation that technology simply equals novelty is problematic because it obscures the true role of digital technologies, which is not as a marker of newness but rather as a signifier of the choices such innovations force upon society" (261). In modern society, being in a position to become an influencer—a position that will be discussed in more detail later on—comes with certain attributes that have become

favorable to younger generations. As exemplified by David, these attributes include attention, popularity, and perhaps monetary gain; however, though technology has generated access to these attributes, it also has "innovated" a harmful mentality "upon society." Specifically, David's need for recognition on social media establishes a lack of recognition, one so severe that he blatantly ignores how dangerous it is for him to wield a weapon that he is clearly inexperienced with. David's mentality is reminiscent of the behaviors seen in real-life with trends such as the Tide Pod challenge—a social media challenge that, despite being obviously dangerous, was popularized during its time of relevancy by many influencers and their followers. By purposefully setting up David's death in this way, Reijn reflects on these behaviors, wanting to make it clear to the younger audiences that, despite the powerful influence influencers may wield, they should be mindful and careful about the harmful behaviors that are being perpetuated within social media spaces.

Though exemplified differently, it is worth recognizing here the use of technology in *Knives Out* as it exhibits similar ideas presented in *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. Despite being in the same time period as *Bodies Bodies Bodies* where the use of technology is popularized, *Knives Out* does not make technology a core subject throughout the film. Therefore, when technology is shown, its use seems meaningful. There are scenes in which technology is presented purposefully, such as when the Thrombeys instantly resort to their cell phones to search for ways to obtain Harlan's will and when Marta's blackmailer communicates with her through email (Johnson). These scenes seem to depict moments of the upper-class utilizing their access to technology as a weapon against Marta in attempts to selfishly gain something for themselves. As discussed previously with *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, Johnson's decision to portray technology in this way highlights the typical socioeconomic status of those who can gain access to technology. However, this decision also presents a similar theme as Reijn—the theme that technology has the potential to inflict dangerous innovations upon society, especially when in the hands of those who are in positions of privilege.

Within fictional crime pieces, suspects are another key element to analyze as they are who the audience primarily focuses on and ultimately follows to solve the mystery that is presented; therefore, their behaviors during the time they are present are often significant and purposeful. As mentioned, *Knives Out* focuses on Harlan's family, the Thrombeys, being questioned about his death. Johnson characterizes the Thrombeys as greedy and narcissistic people, making their behavior reflective of the types of figures in real life that benefit from the prejudiced system society has established. For example, during their questioning by the police, the Thrombeys praise Marta as Harlan's caregiver, insisting that she is "part of the family" (Johnson

00:13:05). Flashback sequences during this scene exemplify the Thrombeys' claims—one showing a push-in shot of Richard, Harlan's son-in-law, smiling at Marta as he seemingly invites her to join the family in conversation (00:13:05). However, the audience is later shown that, as a Latina immigrant, Marta was only invited into the family's conversation because Richard started a debate regarding immigration policies—one in which some of the Thrombeys think immigrant detention facilities are rightful punishments for "breaking the law" while others compare them to concentration camps (Johnson 00:45:52). Johnson is purposeful in making the scene representative of the societal topics that were relevant for the time the film is set in, allowing the audience to recognize the types of people that the Thrombeys represent. Rutigliano analyzes the characterization of the Thrombeys:

> As invested as *Knives Out* is in exposing the culprit masterminding the mystery at hand, it's more invested in exposing more realistic villains...That the Thrombeys variously believe themselves to be allies to the less-privileged or marginalized only makes their selfishness and wickedness feel more true-to-life...*Knives Out* is very clear that these kind of dynastic families should lose their power, but it's loudest about the kinds of shady characters that hide in plain sight, professing to be allies... to an inclusive system that plans to share power, resources, and rights up and down the ladder and across demographics, as long as it is convenient for them. (Rutigliano)

Though the family may claim to be in alliance with Marta, Johnson makes a point to show that between criticizing immigrants right in front of her and fighting her over Harlan's will later on, they clearly are not. Representing figures in real life who falsely claim to stand with those who are oppressed in society, yet continue to benefit from privilege, the Thrombeys are used to expose and warn audiences about society's "realistic villains"—the ones who endanger the hopes of the more equal system that Harlan strives to create.

In *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, similar to Johnson's utilization of the Thrombeys, Reijn uses the characterization of the suspects to expose "realistic villains," creating audience interpretations regarding problematic behaviors within modern influencer culture. As already established, the film's suspects are mostly young-adult influencers—social media figures, actors, and podcasters—who come from upper-class families. This representation is fitting considering that, often, those who can be influencers are able to do so because they are in a position of privilege, having access to the necessary technology as well-off individuals. Reijn clearly depicts these positions of privilege and nepotism; the group resides at an exceedingly lavish mansion owned by David's parents, utilizing its many rooms to partake in expensive

alcohol and drugs while they party, record themselves, and merely talk about their jobs that require "a lot of work" (Reijn 1:12:59). By characterizing and portraying the characters in this manner, Reijn not only creates representational figures based on modern privileged peoples, but she also expands on this representation to recognize and curate audience thoughts based on the problematic behaviors within the influencer realm.

As exemplified earlier with the character of David, in an age where recognition on social media has become more enticing to younger generations, it is much more common to see influencers who neglect their privilege, often playing the victim and saying whatever will gain them the most sympathy or positive attention from an audience. Reijn uses the suspect characters to exemplify this behavior as their quick willingness to blame each other or label themselves as the victim in the situation prohibits them from sensibly handling the events of the night. A scene that best depicts this behavior is shown toward the end of the film. After the deaths of more characters, one of the deaths being the group's fault after a false accusation about who the murderer is, tensions rise, and an argument begins amongst those who are left. However, the disagreement has little to do with the murderous events of the night and consists of the group attacking each other over their flimsy friendships. The group uses generational terms such as "red flags" and "triggering" to critique each other, debates over who is more "rich," and defends themselves so as to appear as the victim within the situation—podcaster Alice attempting to excuse any wrongful behavior by claiming, "I'm an ally" (Reijn 1:08:46-1:10:04). Even though the group is no longer in front of a camera, they still exhibit these harmful behaviors that are becoming so prominent amongst modern online platforms. Author and film critic Justin Chang recognizes Reijn's critique of these behaviors in the article "It Has Its Sharp Moments, but *Bodies Bodies Bodies* Could Use a Few Corpse Corrections":

> In an age when everyone makes a fetish of authenticity, friendships are shown to be the flimsiest and least authentic of constructs, mediated by TikTok...there's promise in [Reijn's] understanding of how, even in a politically progressive, racially and sexually inclusive crowd, people can and do wield the language of social justice to hide their own glaring privilege. (Chang)

Reijn focuses on these characters in hopes of showing audiences that they are representational of those who perpetually misuse their positions on social media to gain popularity—a behavior that the film critiques as an unhealthy and dangerous cycle that only works to protect those who are in privileged positions and should be abolished.

Using suspects as a symbol, both Johnson and Reijn further the discussions about class divisions throughout their films by establishing particular circumstances for their unique suspects, Marta and Bee. Similar to Marta, Bee is also a working-class immigrant; therefore, both women not only stand out amongst the respective suspects but also are put into different positions based on their ethnicity and class throughout their situations. In *Knives Out*, as a minority and member of the working class, Marta already has less privilege in the situation than the other suspects. Academic writer Katarina Dulude recognizes Marta's position in the article "The Roles of Class and Gender in Popular Films of 2019: Hustlers, *Knives Out*, and Avengers: Endgame": "[Marta] would have never obtained so much money had Harlan not deviated from the norm and given it to her, not because she wasn't deserving of it, but because the system rarely rewards those who work hard, but do not start their lives with the resources to propel them towards substantial affluence" (6). Johnson uses Marta's vulnerability as a working-class citizen within the situation to highlight the unfairness in the justice system—a vulnerability that is compounded due to the fact that Marta's mother is undocumented. This theme recurs in scenes throughout the film. Specifically, Marta insists that they call for help when she believes she has switched Harlan's medications; however, knowing there would not be enough time, Harlan hatches the plan discussed earlier, telling Marta in a close-up shot that "[y]our mom is still undocumented, and if this is your fault, she'll be found out, and, at best, deported, and your family will be broken" (Johnson 00:39:56). Despite desperately wanting to tell the truth, Marta is made well aware of the consequences if she does. A later scene where Harlan's son, Walt, threatens to expose Marta's mom if she does not renounce Harlan's will only raises the stakes (Johnson 1:25:50). Johnson writes Marta's character in this way to present and reflect the unjust irony of the justice system—a system that, despite being dedicated to preserving equal treatment, forces an innocent person like Marta to play the part of a murderer covering up their crime out of fear that she will lose her family if she trusts law enforcement.

Although Bee from *Bodies Bodies Bodies* is not a person of color, she is still vulnerable within her situation because, based on her socioeconomic status, the respective suspects treat her with prejudice and essentially view her as an outsider, similar to Marta. Their lack of hospitality toward Bee is present from the beginning of the film. An early scene of David interrupting Bee and her girlfriend Sophie's time together to talk to Sophie "in private" about bringing Bee "without telling anyone" whilst the rest of the group probes Bee about her romantic past and nationality, serves as a clear example (Reijn 00:10:40-00:17:00). Though Bee and the group seemingly begin to feel more comfortable around each other, the group's disdain resurfaces after murders begin to take place and they openly suspect and accuse Bee

without solid evidence and lock her out of the house—a harsh and dangerous choice considering, at this point in the film, the audience is aware of Bee's innocence and still believes a murderer is killing off the group one by one (Reijn 1:01:10). Similar to Johnson's choices regarding Marta, Reijn makes a clear point to viewers by having well-off individuals quickly suspect and endanger someone who does not share the same economic status as them—a point that society's unfair beliefs have embedded a distinct division between people that has reached an unfathomable and dangerous level.

Perhaps the most essential of the fictional crime elements, the resolution of a crime story best emphasizes the story's central purpose, solidifying the conversations presented and the interpretations that have been established. Rafter expands on what the conclusions of crime films offer, explaining that crime films' resolutions give "us contradictory sorts of satisfaction: the reality of what we fear to be true and the fantasy of overcoming that reality; the pleasure of entering the realm of the forbidden and illicit and the security of rejecting or escaping that realm in the end" (3). In different ways, both films achieve this type of "satisfaction;" Johnson achieves it by the end of *Knives Out* by ending the film with Marta overcoming the Thrombey's attempts to reclaim Harlan's will from her—a final closeup shot of her watching the Thrombeys from the balcony and sipping a mug that reads "My house, my rules, my coffee," solidifying her victory (Johnson 2:05:08). Visually, the whole setup is symbolic; Marta's placement above the Thrombeys represents the power she now holds over them as she has acquired the inheritance the family was convinced that they had earned. Rutigliano concurs with Marta's success by the film's ending, remarking that "[t]he film's defensive-sounding title is the first and last sharp point it makes—that taking on a thorny, rotting system like the Thrombey family sovereignty isn't easy, and won't happen without a big fight, or at the very least, screaming bloody murder." In the film's finale, the previous conversations Johnson included come together to represent the metaphorical overthrowing of the modern biased system that the Thrombeys embody. By having this system lose to Marta, Johnson creates a new reality—one he seemingly suggests that society and the audience should stray toward. Less optimistically, by its conclusion, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* achieves the same "satisfaction" *Knives Out* does. After discovering the true cause of David's death, the film concludes with a final scene in which Max, the only one in the group who was not present for the night's events, returns and promptly asks Bee and Sophie, the sole survivors, what happened. In a final close-up, the girls, who are clearly in shock, are both silent as they are brought back to reality (Reijn 1:27:41). While this is can be seen as an unfortunate fate for the characters, the film's conclusion does supply a sense of contentment by having the influencer's

egotistical attempts to save themselves backfire, leaving them either dead due to their unprincipled decisions or in a reality in which pretending to be the perfect influential figure will not be enough to dismiss a murder charge. The film's final moments not only further execute Reijn's themes regarding younger generations recognizing harmful attributes of online and influencer culture, but they also, similarly to *Knives Out*, make a proposition—a reality in which those in privileged positions are unable to fake their way out of the critical or, in the film's case, fatal mistakes they made.

Using the films *Knives Out* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, this essay exemplifies specific and individual aspects of crime narratives that are capable of including social commentary. Both films, utilizing their victims, suspects, and resolutions, discuss and critique the relevant societal topic of class division. Focused on the upper-class Thrombey family who benefits from privilege, *Knives Out* criticizes the current bias system that society perpetuates, creating a new, more hopeful reality by its ending that Johnson believes modern American society should strive toward. Similar yet different, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* follows a group of wealthy social media influencers who, due to their economic statuses, are in privileged positions. The film uses the characters to critique social figures' harmful behavior with technology and behavior within modern influencer culture, working as a cautionary tale for younger generations if they do not recognize the harm in this behavior and choose not to perpetuate it.

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